Chapter 5 = FBI vs. JBS on Harry Overstreet as a Communist Sympathizer or Dupe

Rev. 02/15/15

During its entire existence, the Birch Society has claimed that it is an "educational" organization, and "an army fighting with facts", "whose only weapon is the truth".

According to Robert Welch in the Foreword to the Blue Book of the John Birch Society:

"For our enemy is the Communists, and we do not intend to lose sight of that fact for a minute. We are fighting the Communists -- **nobody else."** [JBS Blue Book, 12th printing, 1961, page ii, emphasis in the original].

NOBODY ELSE ??

In 1970, the JBS published a pamphlet by its founder, Robert Welch, entitled "What Is The John Birch Society?". In it, Mr. Welch sought to summarize what he considered to be the accomplishments of the JBS during its first 11 years of existence. He singled out for comment his 1959 campaign against Dr. Harry A. Overstreet, author of the 1958 book, "What We Must Know About Communism".

Mr. Welch stated that an article appearing in the October 1959 issue of the JBS magazine, *American Opinion* "showed the blatant falsehoods to which Harry Overstreet has resorted in connection with his earlier and continuing close affiliations with Communists and support of Communist purposes." [Edward Janisch, "What We Must Know About Overstreet", American Opinion, October 1959, pages 35-46.]

Welch further described the Overstreet book as "pro-Communist doubletalk" and he observed that it was "visibly designed to get your confidence with the first three quarters of its contents, and then in the last quarter to sell you the exact current Communist line." [What Is The John Birch Society?, 1970, page 18].

In his American Opinion article, Edward Janisch states that the Overstreet book, "attempts to make palatable certain notions which would, if accepted, by large numbers of Americans, render us helpless in the face of the onslaught of World Communism." [American Opinion, 10/59, page 44].

Who was Edward Janisch and what are his credentials for evaluating internal security matters?

A search of all usual databases and references discloses that Mr. Janisch had no paper trail, i.e. no master's thesis or doctoral dissertation listings, no articles listed in *Reader's Guide To Periodical Literature*, no books or other publications in major university and college library catalogs or in the Library of Congress, no listings in the *New York Times* index, or *Washington Post* index, no biographical sketch in either *American Opinion* or *Current Biography* or *Who's Who in America*, or *The Directory of American Scholars*.

In addition, there is no record that Janisch ever contacted or interviewed Harry Overstreet nor anyone associated with Harry, particularly those persons who had expertise in internal security matters.

I can report, however, that after considerable research I was able to discover that Janisch was an Assistant Professor of Government at a very small college in Pennsylvania. (Slippery Rock College now known as Slippery Rock University in Slippery Rock, PA)

In his *American Opinion* article, Janisch characterizes the philosophy underlying the adult-education career of Dr. Overstreet as follows:

"If, on the other hand, you are one of those 'backward souls' who believes in God, love of country, free enterprise, investigations of Communism...then you are 'immature'; and quite possibly, according to Professor Overstreet, you are on the road to mental illness." [American Opinion, 10/59, p. 35].

His reference to "investigations of Communism" will be, as the reader will shortly discover, a particularly vapid and dishonest criticism by Janisch. (See excerpts below from Harry's 1953 testimony, "Subversive Influences in the Educational Process")

Janisch repeatedly uses sarcastic comments and sinister innuendo about the loyalty or patriotism of Dr. Overstreet. For example, he describes "all of the books" by Dr. Overstreet thusly:

"His writings are one of the little webs, along with many other webs the Communists weave together to make up the Big Lie of their total web of deception. He does his work with half-truth, glittering generality, misplaced emphasis, significant omission, and other tricks that mark the prolific popularizer and propaganda hack." [Ibid, pg 35-36].

In case Janisch's nasty insinuations aren't transparent enough, he then offers what he believes is the Communist evaluation of Dr. Overstreet's book on Communism:

"And the ghost of Stalin must be whispering to Khrushchev, 'for this, there should be dancing on our side of the street'." [Ibid, page 35].

According to Janisch:

"Another generation--if we are still free--may well remember the Overstreets' *'What We Know About Communism*, as a stupendous attempt that was designed to soften us at the very hour of our crisis...because the book attempts to make palatable certain notions which would, if accepted by large numbers of Americans, render us helpless in the face of the onslaught of World Communism." [Ibid, pg 44].

In what will shortly become apparent as a particularly egregious comment, Janisch criticizes Dr. Overstreet because: "Here is a book on Communism in which not one of J. Edgar Hoover's somber warnings is mentioned..." [Ibid, pg 44].

In a July 17, 1961 memo to all members of the JBS National Council, Robert Welch discussed suggestion #6 in the JBS Blue Book which was to expose "largely through American Opinion...the real sympathies (as disclosed by their actions) of those who are assiduously helping the Communists without their true purposes or the significance of their actions being realized."

In particular Welch referred to the Janisch article mentioned above as one example of the type of article he had in mind:

"And our article on Overstreet served well a more specific purpose. It enabled our members in many parts of the country to block completely, or offset the effect of, speaking engagements by this octogenarian phoney, and thus materially to reduce the amount of poison he was pouring into the minds of good Americans from his position of previously unchallenged prestige."

Here, then, is a summary of information contained in key FBI documents about Dr. Harry Overstreet and his wife Bonaro and their relationship with the FBI:

A November 1954 memo summarizes the Bureau relationship with Dr. and Mrs. Overstreet:

"Years ago, Dr. Overstreet got mixed up with some leftwing groups and the Overstreets came to Washington approximately three years ago...to straighten out the record."

They were advised by the FBI to submit affidavits to the House Committee on Un-American Activities concerning their past front associations and contributions and they did so. On July 20, 1953, Harry Overstreet submitted a 15-page single-spaced summary concerning his past affiliations to HUAC Chairman Harold Velde. Harry then offered to testify, under oath, to answer any outstanding questions or concerns. Velde informed Harry that his affidavit was sufficient and his testimony would not be required.

The November 1954 memo continues:

"In addition, the Overstreets went to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee and Bob Morris used them on a couple of occasions as witnesses. They were very effective in testifying against the Communist aims in education."

In his 1953 testimony, Harry was asked by SISS Chief Counsel Robert Morris if being an active Communist Party member is compatible with being a teacher. Harry's reply was:

"I'm perfectly convinced, Mr. Morris, that it is quite incompatible with being a teacher in an educational system such as our democracy calls for...The Communist way of life is not a free thinking way of life. It is a conspiratorial way of life. It is people organizing themselves to do something to get rid of a type of society that they hate and therefore it comes under the category of conspiratorial activity rather than thinking activity."

When Robert Morris asked Harry if a teacher should be judged solely on their competence in their subject area, Harry replied, <u>no</u>, "because teaching is a matter of one's total personality and...the Communist attitude calls for fixity of belief, finality of belief, and intolerance of evidence that goes counter to that belief, a hatred of the going order of society, methods of subterfuge, of deviousness. I would say all of these go counter to what is required in democratic educational processes..."

Morris then asked Harry whether or not colleges and universities should undertake the responsibility of determining if there are Communists on their faculties. Harry replied: "Yes" because the "primary interest of a college or university" is determining "how much Communist adherence there is among the teachers because a college wants the best possible teachers." Harry then cited the University of Washington investigative experience as a "model":

"They did a wonderful job there...First of all, they set out to examine the situation with a complete thoroughness. They took months and months to do that thing. Each hearing went over many days."

[See Overstreet 5/28/53 testimony "Subversive Influence in the Educational Process" pages 1017-1029 of "Hearings Before Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of The Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary."]

According to the Overstreets' primary Bureau contact, Assistant Director Louis Nichols:

"There is no question in my mind but that if any one was ever duped through naivety, it is the Overstreets and I think they are doing their utmost in trying to redeem themselves."

[HQ 100-114575-28, November 22, 1954, Louis B. Nichols to Clyde Tolson].

In a September 1955 memo, Assistant Director Nichols again discussed the Overstreets:

"We helped them 3 years ago in explaining away contributions to front groups and the like. They have been very grateful and I have gotten them very much interested in bringing about better understanding in academic circles toward the Bureau."

In October 1955, J. Edgar Hoover dictated a letter of congratulations to Harry on the occasion of his 80th birthday, with the letter to be delivered personally. In early 1956, Hoover sent Overstreet a thank-you note in recognition of Harry's pro-FBI letter that was published in the *Washington Post*.

After the retirement of Louis Nichols, the Overstreets continued their relationship with the Bureau through Inspector William C. Sullivan. In September 1958, a Sullivan memo mentions that he encouraged the Overstreets to write a book "against communism directed toward liberals and progressives, et cetera, who would not normally read a book condemning communism."

Sullivan then observed that he provided considerable assistance to the Overstreets during the preparation of their book entitled "What We Must Know About Communism". The assistance consisted of loaning public source material from FBI files and spending "approximately one night each week (7:00pm to about 11:00pm) during the winter months...devoted to reading and analyzing the materials the Overstreets were preparing." [HQ 100-114575-90, September 19, 1958, and 100-114575-88, October 1, 1958, William C. Sullivan to Alan H. Belmont].

In another memo, Sullivan states that "while working with the Overstreets on this book I purposely had them direct 95% of their thinking to the world communist movement believing this would best supplement the Director's book which was directed almost 100% to the communist movement in the United States." [HQ 100-114575-92, November 25, 1958, Sullivan to Belmont].

A formal review of the Overstreet book was prepared at the Bureau in October 1958 after Harry sent a copy to Hoover inscribed from both him and his wife as follows:

"To J. Edgar Hoover -- With personal gratitude for what you have superbly done for all of us."

The review concluded that "this new book represents cogent advice to the thinking public. It reflects ideas common to the thinking which has gone on in the Bureau for many years." It also was described as a "welcome new aid" in combating Communism. [HQ 100-114575-91, October 1, 1958, W.C. Sullivan to Alan H. Belmont].

In December 1958, Hoover wrote to Harry after reading a newspaper article about him:

"I have seen the interesting article about Mrs. Overstreet and you which appeared in the December 3, 1958 issue of the 'Northern Virginia Sun'. It is always a pleasure to read about good friends because it serves as a reminder of happy associations. It is good to see your fine work recognized in this fitting manner, and your many friends in the FBI join me in sending our best wishes." [HQ 100-114575-93, December 5, 1958, J. Edgar Hoover to Harry Overstreet]

In early 1959, J. Edgar Hoover declined a dinner invitation from Harry Overstreet but replied to him as follows:

"I do hope that your fine book 'What We Must Know About Communism' will enjoy excellent sales and wide reading throughout 1959. We need more and more people like yourselves who will devote their nationally recognized academic talents to the exposure and ultimate defeat of the menace of world communism." [HQ 100-114575-95, January 21, 1959, J. Edgar Hoover to Harry Overstreet].

In January 1959, Director Hoover was contacted by Attorney General Herbert Brownell to solicit his evaluation

of the Overstreet book. The AG wanted to know if Hoover agreed with a favorable review written by columnist Roscoe Drummond which appeared in the *Washington Post* of January 26, 1959. Hoover replied that he did agree with the Drummond column and Hoover suggested that all Justice Department employees should be encouraged to read the book.

Assistant Director C.D. DeLoach requested and received Hoover's permission to contact the Director of the Americanism Commission of the American Legion to request that they add the Overstreet book to their recommended reading list. Per DeLoach's letter, "We agree that it is a good one and would you please put it on your approved list?"

[HQ 100-114575-100, February 2, 1959, W.C. Sullivan to A.H. Belmont, and, 94-1-17998-139 attachment, February 2, 1959, C.D. DeLoach to American Legion].

Former FBI security informant Herbert Philbrick made the following comment about the Overstreets' 1958 book, What We Must Know About Communism:

"The Overstreets have made a unique and valuable contribution to understanding the power and nature of the communist totalitarian system today threatening the freedom of the world." [Oakland CA Tribune, 3/31/59, p11]

Conservative columnist George Sokolsky, praised the Overstreets' book in his nationally syndicated "These Days" column:

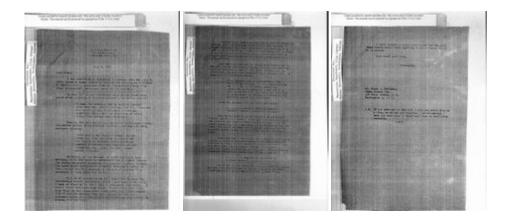
"The Overstreets do an excellent job of objective writing in this field...and this book is well worth reading." [Newark OH Advocate, 10/2/58, p6, George Sokolsky: "Two Useful Books About Communism"]

In February 1961, J. Edgar Hoover responded to an inquiry about the Overstreet book. The Bureau file copy has the following notation:

"We have had cordial relations with Dr. and Mrs. Harry Allen Overstreet and have furnished them considerable assistance in connection with their books." [HQ 100-114575-115, February 17, 1961, Hoover to name deleted for privacy].

The controversy over Overstreet and his book continued for years often due to the JBS smear campaign against him and his wife which took the form of attempting to get Harry's speaking engagements cancelled due to his alleged pro-Communist sympathies and/or by planting hostile questioners in his audiences.

After his retirement from the FBI, Assistant Director Louis B. Nichols continued to defend Harry and Bonaro Overstreet from critics who raised questions about the Overstreets' loyalty and patriotism. In July 1959, for example, Mr. Nichols wrote a letter to Frank Hanighen, the publisher of the conservative newspaper, *Human Events*, [HE] in response to an article which appeared in the 7/8/59 issue of HE that unfairly attacked the Overstreets. The letter by Nichols mentions the irony of the fact that writings by Overstreet were also attacked in Communist publications! See Nichols letter here:



In September 1960, the Americanism Committee of the American Legion's Waldo M. Slaton Post #140 in Atlanta GA published a 112 page booklet entitled "*The Truth About the Foreign Policy Association*" which contained highly pejorative comments about Harry Overstreet on pages 69-73. This booklet was written by Charles Ralph Nichols and his wife Lois.

In response to this attack on the Overstreets, the Southeastern Regional Director of the Foreign Policy Association (David E. Warner) sent Charles and Lois Nichols several items -- including a notarized affidavit by former FBI Assistant Director Louis B. Nichols (no relation to Charles) dated July 18, 1962 attesting to the loyalty and patriotism of the Overstreets. He also enclosed favorable comments about Overstreet which were made by such conservative columnists as George Sokolsky and former FBI informant Herbert A. Philbrick. [HQ 61-7802 is the FBI file on Foreign Policy Association, and serial #207 discusses the controversy over the Nichols' affidavit in support of the Overstreets.]

Overstreet 1964 book, The Strange Tactics of Extremism

In early 1964 Overstreet was sent material to assist him in refuting charges made by extreme right individuals and groups including Edgar Bundy (Church League of America) and Dan Smoot (former FBI Special Agent who retired in 1950). Note: see links to my detailed reports regarding Dan Smoot and Edgar Bundy at bottom of page here:

http://ernie1241.googlepages.com/home

Bundy, whom the FBI described as "a professional anticommunist with whom we have absolutely no dealings" had misrepresented Director Hoover's statements from a 1949 article on Communist influence in religion, and, Dan Smoot was in the habit, from the Bureau's perspective, of making "unfactual and inaccurate statements...concerning national and international problems" and was wrongly capitalizing upon his former association with the Bureau to inflate his credibility. [See Chapter 7 of this Report for more background on Smoot.]

In the summer of 1964, Harry Overstreet furnished advance excerpts to the Bureau of his forthcoming book on the extreme right. The Bureau's favorable review concluded that:

"The material has been reviewed and checked previously by the Domestic Intelligence Division. From our point of view, there does not appear to be anything objectionable."

Assistant Director C.D. DeLoach handwrote an observation on the memo about the Overstreet chapter on Dan Smoot: "I'm glad they're doing this. It's about time someone called his hand." [HQ 100-114575-139, July 23, 1964, M.A. Jones to C.D. DeLoach].

In October 1965, J. Edgar Hoover wrote 90th birthday greetings to Harry "on Director's note paper used for special congratulatory purpose" which was delivered personally and read to Harry by Assistant Director William Sullivan:

"By utilizing your unique experience and abilities in the field of education and psychology in your analyses of communism and its threat to freedom, you have contributed significantly to the intelligent and, therefore, more effective opposition to communism."

[HQ 100-114575-153, October 25, 1965, J. Edgar Hoover to Harry Overstreet].

Overstreets 1969 book on FBI

In 1969, W.W. Norton Company published *The FBI In Our Open Society* by Harry and Bonaro Overstreet.

Director Hoover was so impressed with the book that he notified all Special Agents in Charge of Field Offices via SAC Letter 69-14, dated 2/25/69: "This is an excellent book and portrays the FBI in a most favorable way."

Hoover announced that the Bureau had made arrangements with the publisher for a special discount price and he instructed SAC's to "survey your personnel and advise the Bureau promptly of the number of books to be sent to your office."

The Bureau added the new Overstreet book to its "Autograph Card Form 8-2" which contained those publications which the FBI distributed at no charge with "best wishes" from Hoover himself.

Hoover also instructed Special Agent J. Sizoo to prepare a synopsis of each chapter so that Bureau personnel could use the summary as a "ready reference...in rebutting numerous unfounded claims against the Bureau..." [HQ 66-04-3648, SAC Letter 69-14, February 25, 1969 and HQ 100-114575-184, June 4, 1969, A.W. Gray to W.C. Sullivan].

When Harry died in 1970, senior FBI officials discussed Overstreet's passing and their recommendation that Director Hoover send a condolence telegram to his wife Bonaro:

8/17/70 = M.A. Jones memo to Mr. Bishop on Harry Overstreet:

"We learned that captioned individual died this morning. As you know, Dr. Overstreet and his wife Bonaro Overstreet, were ardent friends and supporters of Mr. Hoover and the FBI. In fact, they had just authored an excellent book about the FBI entitled 'The FBI In Our Open Society' which has been well received."

"Dr. Harry Overstreet is the author of numerous books and articles and is extremely well known for his scholarship. He formerly was a university professor and has maintained an active interest not only in education but also in law enforcement. The Overstreets were personally known to Assistant to the Director Sullivan. Over the years, the Bureau received a number of inquiries from citizens accusing the Overstreets of being either pro-communist or extremely liberal. Actually, neither in his writings or his speeches did Dr. Overstreet ever manifest any sympathy for communism. His recent books have been devoted to alerting the American public to the subversive nature of communism as well as the evils of extremism of the far right. The Director wrote letters to Dr. Overstreet on the occasion of both his 80th and 90th birthdays, the latter being 10/25/65. It is felt the Director would want to write a telegram of sympathy to Mrs. Overstreet. Recommendation: That attached telegram be sent to Mrs. Overstreet:" [HQ 100-114575, #195; 8/17/70 memo from M.A. Jones to Mr. Bishop re: Dr. Harry A. Overstreet and telegram to Mrs. Overstreet; section 5 of file, pages 145-146.]

Notation on copy of memo states: "Discussed with the Director. He approved" per W.C. Sullivan 8/17/70.

TELEGRAM TEXT BY HOOVER:

"I was deeply saddened to learn of Dr. Overstreet's passing and want you to know you have my deepest sympathy. Words certainly are inadequate at a time like this, but I hope you will derive some measure of comfort from knowing that others share your sorrow. My associates and I are most appreciative of the close relationship which we in the FBI were privileged to have with Dr. Overstreet. You can be justifiably proud of the many contributions which he made to his country and the high esteem in which he is held. John Edgar Hoover, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Dr. Overstreet was on Bureau's "Special Correspondents' List."

You may see the actual memo and telegram in section 5 of his FBI HQ main file here: https://archive.org/stream/foia Overstreet Harry A.-HQ-5#page/n0/mode/2up





In its 1959 Report, the California Senate Factfinding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities portrayed Dr. Overstreet as an expert on communism of the caliber of Eugene Lyons, Elizabeth Bentley, Whittaker Chambers, Louis Budenz among others. The Report mentions that Overstreet was invited by the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee to participate in hearings concerning the internal menace of communism. The California Subcommittee describes Overstreet as follows:

"Mr. Overstreet is an example of a non-Communist liberal who was attracted to a few of these front organizations, found out what they were all about, and had the courage to do something about the problem instead of shrinking away from the experience and remaining silent. Many people who have had similar experiences—in fact the overwhelming majority of them—are content to remain silent…" [1959 Report, pages 169 and 183].

Harry's wife, Bonaro, sent a letter to the California Senate Fact-Finding Subcommittee on Un-American Activities to thank them for recognizing that liberals "not previously alert" to Communist influence "could become aware...of the Communist menace" and "not be forever branded as pro-Communist."

[1965] Report, page 176]

Robert Morris, the former Chief Counsel of the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, had a close personal relationship with the Overstreets. Morris wrote to me in March 1989 about the Overstreets. Here is an excerpt:

"I did know Harry and Bonaro Overstreet in the late 1950's and 1960's. They were introduced to me by Louis Nichols when he was Assistant Director of the FBI. They were most helpful to me in my capacity of Chief Counsel to the U.S. Senate Internal Security Subcommittee...They became my friends and I am still grateful for their friendship."

See Morris letter here:



Morris invited the Overstreets to testify as expert witnesses before the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee: [See Harry and Bonaro Overstreet testimony: "*Reaching Through To Young Minds*" in Education For Survival in The Struggle Against World Communism: A Symposium - SISS, 4/12/62 Committee Print, pages 88-93]

Former FBI Security Informant Herbert A. Philbrick of "*I Led 3 Lives*" fame wrote to Senator William Proxmire in 1961 concerning his sources of information regarding Communist infiltration into the U.S. Government.

"During my lectures across the country, however, I do refer frequently to scholars and others who have extensive knowledge in this area."

Among the persons he cited as experts were: Harry and Bonaro Overstreet, Robert Morris, and James Burnham. [Boston FBI file 66-1020-575, February 11, 1961, Herbert A. Philbrick to Sen. William Proxmire].

Ironically, the Birch Society attacks on Overstreet and his book *What We Must Know About Communism* were echoed by Communist Party officials such as William Z. Foster who described the book as follows:

"Here is assembled an extensive collection of prejudices, distortions, and so-called arguments against the Soviet Union and socialism. In addition to the run-of-the-mill reactionaries cited as authorities, there are the opportunists: Djilas, Koestler, Lovestone, Browder and John Gates, The red-baiting has a faint tinge of liberal pretense---it is Hooverism with a shave and a haircut. But its purpose is to keep the cold war going, and to make it hotter if possible...It is sheer propaganda for the most reactionary phases of government policy...The Overstreets make the usual bourgeois idealization of capitalist society. They blithely pass by the two world wars, which were monster crimes of capitalism, as though it had nothing to do with them. They are just as myopic about other capitalist disasters--fascism, depressions, mass unemployment etc...The Overstreet naive assumption is that capitalism is a sort of God-given system beyond the reach of criticism." ...

"The authors undertake to tell the readers what communism is. Here the thesis is familiar. It is the FBI 'theory' which we have heard expounded in many witch-hunting trials ad nauseam, that the communist movement is a conspiracy, a plot against democracy. The Overstreets informs us that the whole plot began with Lenin--and before him, Marx...The Soviet Union is that 'gigantic fruit of conspiracy, the Bolshevik revolution', the result of the plotting of a few misguided and desperate men."

"Through such thought and scholarship, history is reduced to nonsense." ...

"The general effects of *What We Must Know About Communism* will be to blind even more the reactionary elements who will be the main readers of this book, as to what is actually taking place in the world...In it, however, they will learn nothing of any value about the Communist movement, either of this country or of the world. Those who really want to find out just what communism is, and what it means for the welfare of humanity, must look elsewhere than between the covers of the Overstreets' Kampf." [William Z. Foster, *The Overstreets' Kampf*, Mainstream, May 1959, pp 39-44].

A reviewer for the *World Marxist Review* also attacked both the book and the Overstreets and claimed that they did not understand capitalism plus they distorted facts and falsely described Communism as conspiratorial. [E. Arab-Ogly, *Executors of John F. Dulles' Will*, World Marxist Review, 10/60, pp. 83-86].

During a February 1966 press conference, Communist Party leader Gus Hall referred to Harry Overstreet's "filthy criminal falsehoods" against the Communist movement. [HQ 100-114575-164, 3/23/66 memo from W.C. Sullivan to C. DeLoach]

Harry probably deserves a spot in the Guinness Book of Records because he must be the only supposed Communist sympathizer who ever wrote a highly favorable review of J. Edgar Hoover's book, *Masters of Deceit*! [See June 1958 *National Parent-Teacher*, page 32] (national PTA magazine).

For chapters 6-7, click here: JBS - chapters 6-7

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